Improving Japanese EFL Learners' Writing Performance Through Self-Regulated Strategy Development

Joan E. Gilbert

Abstract

This study examines the use and effectiveness of self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), a writing instructional model, in helping Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the university level develop skills and strategies that will improve their writing skills and performance. A pretest and posttest rated by two raters, with SRSD instruction over a 5-week period in between for the experimental group, suggested that the participants who received the treatment could significantly improve their opinion-writing outcomes. This study suggests that instructors could assist language learners develop self-regulated strategies to improve their writing outcomes.

Key words: self-regulated strategy development, Japanese learners of English, writing performance, learning approach

1. Introduction

The ability to formulate and clearly express an opinion in written form is increasingly important for success in university-level courses, the international community, and the workplace. Graham and Perin (2007, 445) contended that writing "provides a powerful medium for persuading others", and it is important for helping students learn how to organize, refine, and demonstrate their knowledge (Little, et al., 2010). Since academic writing became a field of academic study in the 1960s (Matzen & Hoyt, 1994), there have been quite a few studies that have focused on helping students learn to write well by explicitly teaching writing skills, such as grammar and summarization (Fearn & Farnan, 2005; Hayes, 1984; Saddler & Graham, 2005), in addition to studies on the process writing approach, which is an approach to teaching that encourages extended writing opportunities for real audiences

(Hillocks, 1986). However, even with those teaching approaches, not all students have been able to learn to write well enough to meet the demands of school (Graham & Perin, 2007). One research-based writing intervention model, SRSD, has been documented and validated in over 25 published studies to improve students' writing performance (Graham & Perin, 2007; Santangelo, Harris, & Graham, 2008). SRSD has mainly been used to assist weak writers or students with learning disabilities develop skills and strategies that will improve their writing skills, performance, and acquisition. According to Graham and Perin (2007), SRSD instruction allows for more individualized instruction, is criterion-based, emphasizes interactive learning, including scaffolding, and promotes the students' development of self-regulatory skills. While Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) do not fall into the same categories as most of the students in the published studies on SRSD, writing in English can be challenging for them, and if their L2 linguistic proficiency level is low, most of them find it difficult or impossible to transfer their L1 writing skills to their L2 writing (Sugita, 2009).

To date, no known experimental studies have been done on the use of the SRSD model for language learners at the university level. Believing there is a need, I will examine the use of SRSD in helping Japanese university students of EFL improve their opinion writing outcomes in their foreign language, English, and to develop self-regulation skills.

Literature Review

SRSD is a flexible, instructional model for writing that was developed in 1982 by Harris and Graham (see Graham and Harris, 2005b for a description of validated strategies) for teaching writing and self-regulated strategies. The six stages of SRSD instruction include 1. identifying which strategy, such as planning, composing, evaluating, or revising, the students need to learn in order to improve their writing performance; 2. clarifying the purpose of the selected strategy, motivating them to use it, and monitoring their progress; 3. providing a model of that strategy and setting the standard; 4. having the students memorize how to use that strategy so that it can be transferred to other tasks; 5. giving support through constructive peer and teacher feedback; 6. confirming that the students can use the target strategy in present and future writing tasks (Graham & Harris, 2005b; Harris et al.,2008; Santangelo et al., 2008). SRSD is based on multiple theoretical perspectives (Zito et al., 2007), which include attribution theory, social cognitive theory, and motivational theory. It was designed to help learners improve their writing performance, develop self-regulated strategies, and increase their knowledge of what constitutes good writing, which have been shown to increase students' self-efficacy and motivation (Little et al., 2010). While maintaining student motivation is challenging and could be influenced by the way students perceive their ability to perform successfully in exams (Hoffman & Nottis, 2008), Zito (2007) suggested that the SRSD instructional model helps decrease writing anxiety and enhances self-regulation and motivation to perform better. The SRSD instructional model attempts to provide instruction in a supportive process that guides the learners and helps them become independent. In favor of providing instruction in a supportive process, Krashen (1981, 1985) stated that language learners developed a higher level of proficiency if they received "comprehensible input" that was provided through meaningful, interesting, and understandable drills, exercises, or activities. In agreement with Krashen (1985), who stated that the classroom was probably the best place to acquire language "at least up to the

intermediate level" (pp. 104-105), Kato (2009) found that intervention strategies tended to be more useful and appreciated by learners at the elementary and intermediate levels. Similar to stage 3 of the SRSD instructional model, Lavelle and Bushrow (2007), who investigated graduate students' writing strategies and writing outcomes, claimed that instructors might be able to help students improve their writing outcomes by providing them with writing models and examples "which provide familiarity with the rhythm, pace or flow of academic writing" (p. 816). The third stage of the SRSD instructional model also includes providing a standard for their writing outcomes. In Japan, writing instruction has recently seen a paradigm shift from focusing on accuracy to focusing on fluency; however, no significant changes have been made to the existing rating scales (Sugita, 2009). Rating scales or rubrics help learners become more aware of how they are assessed and could lead to improved writing outcomes (Andrade et al., 2009).

When teaching writing strategies to language learners, Qi (2007) claimed that it is essential to take into account the cultural background and language development level of the students when selecting the best method for a group of learners. In Qi's study, recitation was chosen as the method for the Chinese learners to use as it is a common method to learn materials in China, and it was thought by the author that it would reduce the participants' anxiety level, which would in turn provide conscious input. In a study with Korean language learners, Kim (2009) found that it was necessary for the students to match their motives with clear goals in order to achieve a higher level of L2 proficiency. While studies have been done on teaching language learners the writing process or writing strategies, this is the first known study to examine the effect of the instructional model SRSD on Japanese EFL learners and on participants at the university level in Japan.

Hypothesis

The purpose of this study will be to examine the relationship between SRSD instruction

and opinion writing performance of EFL Japanese university learners.

Hypothesis: The EFL Japanese learners in an experimental group receiving SRSD instruction will improve their opinion writing outcomes significantly relative to a control group not receiving such instruction.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 37 second-year university students, 18 in the experimental group and 19 in the control group, who were studying English as a foreign language at a private university in western Japan. None of the participants were language majors, but all were required to take two compulsory English language courses: writing and speaking and reading and listening. Both groups attended the intermediate level writing and speaking course which was held once a week for 90 minutes. Students at the university are placed in advanced, intermediate, or elementary levels for English language courses by means of a standardized placement test given at the beginning of the academic year. All of the participants in this study shared the same first language (Japanese), were 19 or 20 years old, and attended the writing and speaking course, which was taught by the same instructor. Participation in this study was on a volunteer basis and did not count for a grade or credit, and all participants were asked to voluntarily sign a consent form.

Data collection and analysis

Both the experimental group participants and control group participants were given a pretest. Each participant in the experimental group wrote a 6-number code on their pretest to be used for identification, and each participant in the control group wrote a 6-number code and a letter on their pretest to be used for identification. The participants used their same

codes for the posttest, and the codes were known only to the participants to ensure privacy. The data were collected by means of a pretest and a posttest that had three prompts each. Based on Kroll and Reid's (1994) research on designing writing prompts, bare prompts, which are a direct and simple stimulus for the participants in the study to respond to, were provided. Because several factors, such as the clarity of the prompt and whether or not the participants have enough knowledge or experience to answer it (Horowitz, 1991; Kroll & Reid, 1994) need to be considered, both the pretest and posttest had three prompts so that each participant could select the one that he or she had the most knowledge about. The content for the prompts was based on topics that all participants had access to: cell phones, Internet use, educational opportunities at university, high-tech gadgets like computers, legal voting age, and cosmetic surgery for job hunting, and all participants were given 30 minutes. The reasoning behind the set amount of time of 30 minutes is that the Educational Testing Service that tests writing performance (Kroll & Reid, 1994) uses this time limit. The participants were required to write 100 words, which was considered ample amount for evaluation. Both the experimental group participants and the control group participants took the pretest and posttest, but only the experimental group received SRSD instruction for the 5-week period in between. The pretests and posttests were scored by two raters. One was a Japanese university instructor of English, and the other was a high school English composition teacher in the United States. The raters were given an explanation of the evaluation scale or rubric (see Appendix) and instructed to follow it to rate two sample paragraphs before the actual rating of the participants' tests were done. The inter-rater reliability for the practice session was .91. The pretests and posttests from both the experimental group participants and the control group participants were randomly mixed and two sets of copies were made. The order of the sets was exactly the same. The raters completed the rating in one session, requiring almost 4 hours. Inter-rater reliability for the 37 opinion paragraphs was .84.

The data were analyzed using the independent *t*-test, which is used to compare the means of two different groups of people in two different situations (Field, 2005, p. 303). In this study, there were two different groups of students, the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group participants received SRSD instruction, whereas the control group students did not. According to Field, the independent *t*-test compares conditions to determine the means of the two groups, which is important as the differences between the two groups could be due to other factors, like motivation or time of day (p. 296). In order to determine whether the difference between the two group's means is statistically significant or by chance, the size of the samples has to be the same. In this study, the experimental group had 18 students, but the control group had 19 students. Therefore, the standard error of difference, which is the same as the standard deviation of the means (*df*), was calculated to determine how representative it was of all of the students in the study (p. 17). In addition, the confidence interval (CI) was calculated to make sure the range of means represents the students in this study. As the variances of the two groups were different, a Levene's test was conducted. If the Levene's test shows the difference between the variances is significant at $p \leq .05$, then the null hypothesis is incorrect (Field, p. 301). Finally, the *t*-test was calculated. All calculations were done by using computer software, specifically the Statistical Analysis Package for the Social Scientist (SPSS).

Procedure

Both the experimental group participants and the control group participants were enrolled in the same level, compulsory, writing course and taught by the same instructor. The study was carried out from the third week to the eighth week of the term or for 5 weeks between the pretest and the posttest. All of the students took the pretest and posttest. The experimental group students received the six stages of SRSD. (Graham & Harris, 2005b; Harris et al., 2008; Santangelo et al., 2008) as briefly outlined in the literature review and

described further in Table 1 below. With the exception of the SRSD instruction, all of the participants in this study received the same instruction. Both groups used the same textbook, which included a mini-lesson on opinion paragraphs and featured a variety of genres. All of the participants received instruction on brainstorming, planning, and revising also as part of a lesson.

TABLE 1: Stages of SRSD instruction

Stage 1: Develop Background Knowledge a. give pretest: identify your students' deficits b. explain: what constitutes a good opinion essay and provide a rubric c. create a mnemonic: help them memorize the components
Stage 2: Identify Missing Components a. Review the mnemonic to determine which components were missing in their pretest opinion paragraph. b. Set goals: have students identify the components they want to improve.
Stage 3: Provide Good Example Paragraphs a. Show the students how to use the strategy by modeling it more than once.
Stage 4: Memorize a. Help the students become familiar enough with the strategy so that they can use it automatically. This is done by identifying the components in model paragraphs.
Stage 5: Support a. Have the students practice writing opinion paragraphs in small groups and provide scaffold instruction
Stage 6: Independent Performance a. give posttest b. confirm goals: check to see if students reached their goals c. maintenance over time: assess whether strategy use is internalized

Since SRSD is a flexible instructional model, some of the stages were adapted to suit the Japanese participants in the experimental group in this study. These adaptations will be further explained below.

During stage one, it is necessary to assess which strategy, such as planning, composing, evaluating, or revising, the students need to learn to use in order to improve their writing performance. After analyzing the experimental group's opinion paragraphs and the plain paper that was provided during the pretest, it was determined that only 2 out of 18 participants had planned in written form before they actually wrote their opinion paragraphs for their pretest. As the planning strategy has been shown to improve writing outcomes (Little, Lane, Harris, Graham, Story, & Sandmel, 2010), planning in addition to composing strategies, or what components are used in a good opinion essay: topic sentence, reasons, explanations, counterargument and explanation, and conclusion (Graham & Harris, 2005b; Harris et al., 2008; Santangelo et al., 2008), were focused on. A rubric (see Appendix) was provided, and a mnemonic was formed. Different from previous studies using SRSD (e.g., Graham & Harris, 2005b; Harris et al., 2008; Santangelo et al., 2008), the participants in this study created their own mnemonic: "OR3E3CACAEC". A simplified exposition of this device is as follows:

O- state your Opinion.

R3 - write 3 Reasons to support your opinion.

E3- provide 3 Explanations for each of your reasons.

CA- include a Counterargument to show you know both sides.

CAE - give an Explanation for your counterargument.

C - include a Conclusion.

Previous studies had used "TREE", which stands for topic sentence, reasons, explanations, and counterargument and explanation. (Graham & Harris, 2005b; Harris et al., 2008; Santangelo et al., 2008) This stage was adapted for the Japanese learners for the following reason. Japanese learners in general have been taught in middle schools and high schools to memorize grammatical patterns and focus on accuracy when writing compositions. (Sugita, 2009) Therefore, by giving them the power to produce their own mnemonic to help them memorize the components of an opinion paragraph, it was hoped that that the

participants would feel less anxiety, have more motivation to perform better, and start to take control of their learning.

In stage two, using the rubric, the participants identified which components were missing from their pretest opinion paragraphs and made a list of goals for their next writing task. The mnemonic was written on the board as a reminder. As the rubrics found in the past literature for use for SRSD were designed for younger students, one was designed especially for this group of participants (see Appendix).

During the third stage, the instructor modeled the use of planning and employing the mnemonic to write, step-by-step, three different opinion paragraphs. This stage was not changed from the original.

For the fourth stage, the participants were given model opinion paragraphs and asked to identify the components. Like the third stage, this stage was not changed.

The fifth stage was the most important as the students practiced writing opinion paragraphs through collaborative practice with other participants in small groups while receiving scaffold support through the process from the instructor. This stage helped the participants prepare themselves to do the writing task independently. Unlike the original, this stage was adapted by adding more group work and scaffolding and less feedback, because as in Qi's (2007) study, it was thought that it would lessen the participants' anxiety level, which would in turn provide conscious input (Krashen, 1981,1985).

For the final stage, the participants were given a posttest under the same conditions as the pretest. After the test, the participants evaluated their own success by checking to see how many of the components listed on the rubric and their goal sheets were completed. While this stage was not adapted, the students were allowed to use 6-number codes (see data collection section) for their pretest and posttest, which allowed them to "save face" if their progress was not as much as others in the group. In Japanese culture, the ability to remain unknown or not stand out from the group usually provides security, and it was hoped that it

would decrease writing anxiety and enhance self-regulation and motivation to perform better as suggested by Zito (2007).

Results

On average, the students that received SRSD instruction improved their opinion writing outcomes significantly relative to the control group that did not receive such instruction. The results for opinion paragraph scores are significant ($df(35) = 5.712$, $p = .000$) for the experimental group that received SRSD instruction (M = 3.00, SD = 1.372), and the effect size, measured by r2 was .20, indicating 20% of the variance in opinion paragraph scores was accounted for by SRSD instruction. The 95% CI of the difference was 1.79804-3.78091 (see Table 3). However, the word count results are insignificant according to the same Levene's test as the resulting p-value of .148 is more than the critical value of 0.05.[1]

TABLE 2: Means and Standard Deviation of Word Count and Opinion Scores

Post score – Pre score	Groups	Sample size	Mean	Std. Deviation	Standard Variation
DWC Post word count – Pre word count	experimental	18	17.4444	22.39281	5.27804
	control	19	7.5263	18.33445	4.20621
DOS Post opinion score – Pre opinion score	experimental	18	3.0000	1.37199	.32338
	control	19	.2105	1.58391	.36337

DWC=Post Word Count – Pre Word Count

DOS=Post Score Opinion – Pre Score Opinion

[1] The results show that there is a statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups on opinion score (DOS) (p. < .000) but not on word count (DWC) (p. =.148), although the experiential group has a higher average score (17.44) than a control groups (7.52). The reason for insignificance could be the large variances (standard deviation).

TABLE 3: Correlations Among Factors of Word Count and Opinion Scores

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
DWC	Equal variances assumed。	.149	.701	1.478	35	.148	9.91813	6.71214	-3.70823	23.54449
	Equal variances not assumed			1.470	32.912	.151	9.91813	6.74906	-3.81433	23.65059
DOS	Equal variances assumed	1.044	.314	5.712	35	.000	2.78947	.48836	1.79804	3.78091
	Equal variances not assumed			5.735	34.734	.000	2.78947	.48643	1.80169	3.77725

Discussion

Opinion paragraph components

After analyzing the pretest paragraphs (hereinafter referred to as the pretest baseline), the participants' opinion paragraphs generally lacked clearly stated and substantive support for their opinions as their paragraphs were either void of or had inadequate development of their reasons and explanations for their reasons. In comparison with the pretest components, 75% of the experimental group participants after SRSD intervention were able to add an extra reason and explanation for that reason to support their opinion and 25% of them could provide two extra reasons and explanations for those reasons. Without SRSD intervention, 53% of the control group participants could add an extra reason and explanation for that reason and only 13% could provide two extra reasons and explanations for those reasons. The most significant difference was the increase in those who wrote a counterargument and explanation to support it. At pretest baseline, 50% of the experimental group participants could produce a counterargument and explanation for it, but at posttest baseline, 91% of the experimental group participants could produce a counterargument and explanation for it. In

sharp contrast, at pretest baseline, 44% of the control group participants could produce a counterargument and explanation for it, and without explicit instruction, there was no increase in the number of control group participants that could produce a counterargument and explanation for it.

Word count:

At baseline, the mean word count for the control group's pretest was 95 compared to 98 for the experimental group's pretest. The mean number of words for the posttest for the control group was 102.5, correlating to an overall average increase of 7.5 words, and for the experimental group, it was 115.4, correlating to an overall average increase of 17.4 words. Out of 18 participants in the experimental group, only two participants did not produce longer paragraphs compared to five out of 19 participants in the control group. While these results show that there is a statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups on opinion paragraph scores ($p. < .000$) but not on word count ($p. = .148$), the experiential group has a higher average score for word count (17.44 more words) than the control group (7.52 more words). The reason for insignificance could be due to the large variances (standard deviation).

Word count and opinion components' scores:

There seemed to be no correlation between the increase in the number of words and the opinion components' scores. There was only one participant in the experimental group who received the same score for the opinion components and the other 17 received better scores. There were two participants who wrote shorter paragraphs, but one received two points higher on the posttest and the other received three points higher on the posttest. Out of the five participants in the control group that received lower scores, only one participant wrote a shorter paragraph.

Word count and prompt selection:

The participants were given a choice of three prompts for the pretest and three prompts for the posttest. The mean word count of the pretest for the 13 participants (35%) that selected prompt #1 was 94.46 words which correlated with the mean word count of 94.30 for the 21 participants (57%) that selected prompt #2. However, only 3 participants (8%) selected prompt #3 and the average word count was higher at 119.66 words. Likewise, the posttest mean word count for prompt #1 was 112.93 words for 15 participants (41%) which again correlated with the average word count of 111.23 words for prompt #2 for 13 participants (35%). The 9 participants (24%) that selected prompt #3 had a lower mean word count of 98.44 words.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that the instructional model SRSD can be effective in helping EFL Japanese university learners improve their writing performance, develop self-regulated strategies, and increase their knowledge of what constitutes good writing. The participants in this study were able to improve their writing performance for opinion paragraphs through the six stages of instruction and develop self-regulation strategies by means of a supportive process that aided them to reach independent performance. However, as this is the first known study to examine the effect of the instructional model SRSD with Japanese language learners and with learners at the university level in Japan, further studies should be done to confirm the results and to determine whether the participants are able to use the self-regulated strategies over time.

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Appendix: Rubric for EFL Opinion Writing Component

Topic Sentence = T

In the beginning of the paragraph, there should be a sentence that makes a clear reference to the question and summarizes exactly what you are going to write about.

Reason = R (Usually 3)

Does it explain why the person believes that?

Explanation = E (Usually 3)

Does the writer support their reasons?

Counterargument – CA

Is there a sentence expressing the opposite side of their opinion?

Counterargument Explanation = CAE

Does the writer support their counterargument reason?

Conclusion = C

Does the writer summarize their opinion?

Component	Yes(Y) or No (N)	Score comment, if needed
Topic sentence (T)		/1
Reason #1		/1
Explanation for R #1		/1
Reason #2		/1
Explanation for R #2		/1
Reason #3		/1
Explanation for R #3		/1
Counterargument (CA)		/1
Explanation for CA		/1
Conclusion (C)		/1
		TOTAL SCORE: /10